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ABSTRACT

To determine children's perceptions of underlying morals or messages in television drama, a study was conducted in which four early prime time situation comedies were selected for viewing by 15 children per program in kindergarten/first grade, 15 children per program in third/fourth grade, and 8 children per program at the sixth grade level. The children were removed from classrooms in groups of three or four and shown one of the four programs. After viewing the program, the children were taken to another room and interviewed. Almost none of the kindergartners and first graders was able to see a lesson that unified the content of the program, but almost 40% of the sixth graders could correctly identify a lesson. These results suggest that children's ability to identify a moral or lesson may depend on their comprehension of plot and require a higher level of cognitive development. (DF)

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CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF MORAL THEMES IN TELEVISION DRAMA

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Abstract

Many television programs, whether by intent or not, can be seen and interpreted as video parables. That is, they imply a moral or a lesson to be learned. The nature of that lesson, if any, depends not only on the content of the program but on the way the viewer interacts with the content. Focusing on children, this study examines the extent to which they decode or interpret television situation comedies for these kinds of underlying moral themes or lessons, and if so, what sorts of lessons children see. Children kindergarten through 6th grade viewed prime time situation comedies and were then asked to say what they thought the lesson of the program was. Four programs were used, each having been intended by the producers to convey a clear prosocial moral theme. Virtually none of the kindergartners and first graders were able to see a lesson which truly unified the content of the program, though many of them did report a lesson of some kind. By sixth grade, the proportion of children who reported a unifying lesson was roughly 40 percent. The ability to see unifying lessons improved throughout the grade school years, while children's knowledge of the central plot elements peaked and stabilized in middle grade school, thus suggesting that while the former may depend on the latter, it is distinct from it and entails a higher level of cognitive development. The results of the study are discussed in terms of their theoretical implications for understanding how children read television and in terms of the potential of prime time dramas for enhancing children's moral development.

It is logical to assume that the impact of a media message on a child child will depend on his/her understanding of it. It is this assumption that underlies the considerable work on children's processes of comprehending television (Christenson 1983; Comstock et al. 1978; Nimh 1982). However, comprehension is not a single process; there are many different types and levels. This paper deals with one of those types, specifically, the ability or tendency to view a program and extract from it an underlying moral or lesson. The findings presented here are relevant not only to our understanding of how children interpret television programs but also, by implication, to our picture of television's role in the acquisition of social norms and mores.

BACKGROUND

Many television programs can be seen as video fables or parables. That is, when they are considered organically, they suggest or imply a social moral or "lesson to be learned." The most mundane example is "crime doesn't pay," but of course many topics other than law enforcement are treated in television drama, and in these programs as well as the crime show there is the possibility for the viewer to infer a general lesson or moral on the basis of the events, character portrayals and outcomes in the program. Whether the implied values and prescriptions are "antisocial" or "prosocial" depends on one's outlook. In general, though, the potential is there for television to influence moral development through the process of portraying scenarios which can be construed as carrying or implying a general social lesson.

It is often assumed that children learn morals and lessons from television. However, we do not know currently either the extent to which they in fact do decode programs for such messages or, if they do, the nature of the

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Note: The research carried out here was conducted under a grant from ABC, Inc.

morals and lessons they construct. In a study concerning children's interpretation of prose fables, Moss (1983) reports that after some considerable coaching eight and nine year olds seemed to be able to make the connection between a fable like "The Milkmaid and Her Pail" and its moral, "Pride comes before the fall." No data were reported from other age groups here, but the sense of the report is that the extraction of a lesson or moral from a prose fable is difficult for children in middle grade school.

Of course, television programs are very different from prose fables. They are longer, frequently more complex, and provide considerable visual information which may distract a child from the lesson-relevant features of a TV story. On the other hand, prose fables are frequently placed in archaic situations and couched in archaic language. Further, the visual nature of television seems to be able to assist children in making more mature moral judgments (Chandler, Greenspan and Barenboim 1973). For these reasons, we must rely primarily on the literature concerning television comprehension processes to provide much of the background for this paper.

One critical factor in the process of extracting an underlying lesson or moral from a TV program is the thoroughness and accuracy of a viewer's apperception of the events and relationships within the plot or the story line. If a child were to see a television enactment of the fable of the tortoise and the hare and either tune out before the hare takes his rest or fail to see the connection between the hare's rest and his ultimate defeat, then the lesson to be learned (if any) presumably would be different than one based on a more complete attention to and recall of the ingredients of the story.

Even fairly young children are able to understand much of what goes on in television narratives. That is, they can make many of the basic observations and simple inferences involved in following a story line. However, there is a

well-documented and rapid development, located primarily in early and middle grade school, toward more detailed and accurate plot comprehension. We know, for instance, that from preschool through grade school there is a steady increase in the sheer amount of plot-related information learned as well as the amount of important, central information, (Collins 1975; Drew and Reeves 1980; Hale, Miller and Stephenson 1968), and the same years see a rapid spurt in the ability to recall the proper sequence of visual scenes (Leifer et al. 1971). In addition, the abilities to specify causal relationships among scenes (Flapan 1978), correctly describe the motives and consequences of characters' actions (Collins, Berndt and Hess 1974), and indicate the nature of internal feelings and emotions (Leifer and Roberts 1972) have all been found to be almost totally lacking in the preschool or kindergarten child but quite sound by late grade school.

During the same period, comprehension and recall of TV fare become progressively more integrative and inferential in nature (Collins 1975; Collins et al. 1978). For instance, Collins and his colleagues (1978) make the point that thorough comprehension involves an ability to see beyond the information shown explicitly to some of the logical implications of that information. Accordingly, they looked at developmental changes in: (a) the ability to recall the essential elements in the plot of a TV program; and (b) the ability to infer events and actions clearly implied by essential plot elements but not expressly stated in the narrative. Using second, fifth, and eighth graders, Collins et al. found linear improvement with age in learning of explicit central content, thus confirming various other studies. Further, even when second graders did recall the central scenes in a program, they were unable to use the explicit information to arrive at inferences about events which, though not shown on screen, must have happened based on the explicit

information. Fifth and eighth graders, however, were able to make some of these inferences.

Overall, the research on children's comprehension of television suggests that we can trace two general trends, one beginning relatively early on and the other somewhat later. Somewhere around first or second grade, children begin to pick up a great deal of the central information in television drama—they begin to recall the basic story line in something like its proper sequence and to perceive accurately the characters' motivations, internal mental states and the consequences of their actions. Somewhat later, apparently in the middle to late grade school years, they begin to integrate actively these bits and pieces of information by filling in spaces and going beyond the explicit information provided.

On the basis of our understanding of the development of children's plot comprehension alone, then, we could expect a rapid and steady evolution in the types of lessons they would extract from television drama—essentially, the lessons should become progressively more "appropriate" in the sense that they would be based on a more thorough and integrated understanding of the central events, characterizations, and outcomes and in the plot. However, the ability to decode programs for underlying morals or lessons would seem to entail more than a thorough knowledge of who did what to whom, why, and with what consequences. Even if the important elements in a story are thoroughly perceived and understood, a child viewer, indeed, any viewer, still may not see the relevance of the specific story to general values or standards of conduct. In the current context, the "highest-level" processing of a story would be grounded in plot comprehension but would further require the ability to abstract and reformulate the story into a general, non-program-bound moral or lesson.

At the highest level, decoding a television program for a lesson is an active, inferential process. Not only must the story be understood, but it must also be seen to have general implications; the events, emotional states, and outcomes must be seen to belong to a larger class. For example, one of the television dramas used in the present study revolved around a young girl who lies to her family and friends in order to finagle an outing to a rock concert which her father had forbidden her to attend. In the end, she is found out, lectured, and feels sorry for what she did. There are probably several lessons to be learned from this, but the immediate point is that in order to see any lesson at all it is necessary to perceive that this specific story about a specific child is relevant to and symbolic of other children in other situations. Even assuming this awareness, the story must still be boiled down to its essentials and a general lesson or moral, i.e., one that reflects the broader implications of the story, be formulated.

This abstract set of cognitive operations is of a sort that one would associate logically with Piaget's stage of formal operations (Piaget 1970), and on that basis one would not expect to see this form of lessons extracted in this form any earlier than eleven or twelve years. There is, however, some evidence which hints that at least some children may be capable of this level of processing at slightly younger ages. First, there is the Collins et al. (1978) finding demonstrating the development of inferential plot comprehension between second and fifth grades which, though it does not refer to perceptions of morals or lessons, does suggest that by fifth grade many children are able to apply logical and inferential thought to television content. Of equal relevance is the evidence that the same age interval—second to fifth--also sees the emergence of the knowledge that there may be a symbolic intent behind a message in addition to a literal meaning (Worth and Gross 1974). This

awareness that "somebody might mean something by this" constitutes a viewing strategy that would be clearly instrumental to the extraction of a lesson from a television drama. If, as would seem reasonable, the development in the two prior studies was not all accomplished during the summer between fourth and fifth grade, we might expect these sorts of cognitive skills to be employed by some fourth and even a few third graders.

In sum, the process of viewing a television program and taking a lesson away from it is problematic in two senses. First, the plot itself may be misconstrued—events jumbled in time, motives and consequences misperceived, relatively insignificant events attended to instead of central ones--thus making it more likely that any lesson which might be gleaned from the story will be "inappropriate." Second, even if the important elements in a program are thoroughly perceived and understood, a child still may not see the relevance of a specific story to general values or standards of conduct. The highest-level processing of a story would thus be one which was grounded in a thorough comprehension of the plot but which also entails (a) an awareness that stories can have broader, more general implications; and (b) an ability to distill and reduce the story into an abstract, general, non-program-bound moral or lesson.

On the basis of the relevant research and cognitive developmental concepts, then, one is certainly not led to expect any appreciable development of the ability to extract morals from stories among children in kindergarten or early grade school, though children this young may well have considerable understanding of story events and details. Rather, the tendency to distill an underlying message should develop during the middle to late grade school years. In any case, information concerning this mode of processing and interpretation ought to be important both to our understanding of how children "read"

audiovisual narratives and to the construction of a sensible picture of the general role television plays in moral development as a teacher of morals and values.

Given the considerations established above, a study was undertaken to shed light on children's perceptions of underlying morals or messages in television drama. As such, the focus here is on children's cognitive processing of television content as a mediator of moral learning from television. One might just as easily talk about how children's moral development forms their interpretations of television. The sort of moral judgment a child is able to make in general certainly constrains the range of lessons he/she is likely to pull from television programs. For instance, one whose moral development is characteristic of Piaget's stage of "moral realism" (Piaget 1970) or Kohlberg's "good boy morality" (Kohlberg 1969) will be incapable of seeing the world in terms of abstract principles of justice, and will therefore not come up with a lesson based on that sort of moral reasoning, no matter how thoroughly he/she may follow the story. Indeed, there are many other factors, some linked to age and some not as closely associated with it, which might figure in the extraction of a moral lesson. In the present study I acknowledge that there are multiple important determinants and/or indexes of children's processing of television, but do not measure them independently. Instead, I concentrate on the important central question of whether and how children perceive moral lessons in television programs, recognizing that there are many important contributors to the process.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

Stimulus materials. Four early prime time, or "kidult," programs were selected for viewing, one episode each of "Laverne and Shirley," "Benson,"

"Mork and Mindy," and "Happy Days." Each episode was judged by a team of adult viewers to imply a practical or moral lesson. Though it may not be theoretically significant it may still be important from a policy standpoint to note that the lessons tended to be what one might call (with obvious peril) "prosocial" in nature. However, there probably is no theoretical justification for suggesting that the process through which a lesson may be extracted would be different with lessons less positive in nature. Here are synopses of the plots, with a "high-level" lesson or moral after each. (This lesson was the one used in a closed-ended item to detect lesson awareness; thus, the language was consciously simple so children could understand.)

"Laverne and Shirley." Laverne and Shirley receive a visit from Shirley's brother Bobby who is on leave from the Navy. Bobby has a drinking problem. Laverne is the first person to realize it; she criticizes Shirley for not being able to face up to it. Shirley reluctantly admits the truth and resolves to confront Bobby on the issue. As Bobby's military leave is ending, she finally does. Bobby, however, denies he has a problem at first. Finally, both Shirley and Laverne come down hard on Bobby—for drinking too much, for refusing help, for being unappreciative of the efforts of friends, for not admitting the problem, etc. Bobby is told he is no longer welcome in the house, then Laverne and Shirley retire to their rooms. After they leave, Bobby makes the crucial phone call to AA. High-level lesson: Sometimes you have to be mean to people to really help them.

"Benson." The Governor is getting ready to leave on a business trip when his daughter Katie asks permission to go to a rock concert. He refuses permission and then leaves for the airport. Katie mopes around the house, then concocts a plan which involves giving everybody in the household, including Benson, the impression she is at a friend's house while she actually goes to the concert. However, Benson discovers from the friend's mother what has gone on. When Katie returns home, Benson confronts her with the lie she has told. Benson says he is upset and feels betrayed, saying it will be a long time before they can be friends again. He discusses the relationship between trust and friendship. When the Governor (Katie's father) returns, Katie comes clean with him even though everybody would have covered for her. Thus she regains Benson's trust and friendship. High-level lesson: People can't be friends if they don't trust each other.

"Mork and Mindy." Mork visits a group called the Committee to Clean Up Boulder, whose support might be useful to Mork's friend Flavor, who is running in a city election. Flavor assumes the group is anti-pollution; it turns out the group is really a Ku Klux Klan-type organization. Mork doesn't see beyond

their costumes, antics, and ethnic jokes, which he thinks are funny. Mork invites their leaders over to meet Mindy and Flavor. They, however, see what is going on immediately and order the people out. The Committee gladly leaves, with Mork, who thinks Flavor and Mindy are being unfriendly to his "friends." Later Mork sees the error in his ways and apologizes to Mindy. When they return home, however, they find their house has been ransacked by the Committee, who have hung an effigy saying "Go home, Polack!" Mork seeks revenge and goes to trash their meeting hall. Mindy follows, convinces him that this only adds hate to hate. The Committee walks in and threatens Mork, but he uses his magical powers on them, turning them all different colors, saying they will not be changed back until they "learn the meaning of brotherhood." High-level lesson: You shouldn't hate people just because they're different from you.

"Happy Days." Fonzie hires a guy confined to a wheelchair, Don, to help him in his garage. Don's attitude toward life and the job turn out to be very negative. Fonzie tells the Cunninghams that Don is driving him crazy with his hostility, and they have Don over for dinner to see if things can be worked out. However, Don is just as rude to them as he is to Fonzie. Don quits, but Fonzie ends up feeling bad about it when he discovers that before Don was in the wheelchair (auto accident) he was a mechanic himself. Don returns to the garage to pick up some papers and Fonzie says he can stay on. Don reacts with more negativism, saying he doesn't want to work in this "dump" anyway, whereupon Fonzie gets in a wheelchair and chases Don around the room. In the last scene, Don shows up to apologize, says that Fonzie's getting into the wheelchair really showed him that people cared, adding that the Cunninghams had treated him like a normal person and were honest with him, which he appreciated. As Don leaves, Fonzie mentions a problem he is having with a car at the garage, and Don goes with him to help fix it. High-level lesson: Even if something's "wrong" with a person, treat him like anyone else.

Participants. The children who participated in the study were from San Francisco Bay area public schools--all located in middle to low-middle income neighborhoods. The design called for 15 children per program at the two lowest age groups--kindergarten/first grades and third/fourth--and 8 children per program at the 6th grade level. Sixth graders were purposely undersampled because it was felt their communication skills would allow for a more efficient interview process and more reliable data. Because of difficulties in logistics (for instance, a mother's arriving to pick up a child for a dental appointment in the middle of an interview, a child's getting sick, or language barriers between interviewers and children) the actual distribution of subjects differed slightly from the plan. The ethnic breakdown was: 81%

Anglo, 11% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 3% Black for the total sample of 156. There were 82 girls, 74 boys (see Note 1).

Key variables. The most critical measure was of the nature of a child's perception of moral themes and lessons in the programs, a dimension which was tapped in two ways. First, children were given the opportunity to report whatever lesson they saw in an open-ended format; second, they were asked to select a lesson from a group of three responses, one of which our judges had agreed was the highest-level unifying lesson, the other two of which were perhaps plausible (in that they were related to the program in some way) but were not unifying themes of the program. The objective question was an alternative way to detect in a given age group some general tendency to extract highest-level moral themes. The second set of dependent measures concerned comprehension of the central elements in the program--who did what to whom, why, and with what consequences--measured through a series of objective questions on the four programs.

Design. The design of the study was simple: on most dependent variables it was treatment-only; there was no control group and the major independent variable was age group. On the multiple choice "lesson" question, though, a randomized group design was used, in which the responses of children who had seen a given program were compared to those who had not. Suppose, for instance, it was found that 50% of a certain group responded to the three-choice "lesson" question with the highest-level response. If one took as our measure of chance the inverse of the number of options, it would appear that some significant proportion of the children in this group were indeed interpreting the program at that level. However, there might well be something else about the response which attracts children at a rate better than 33 1/3%--it may have a word they like, it may sound more like certain

rules they have at home, etc. In other words, rather than indexing the way children are processing the information in a specific program, the 50% figure might represent a general response tendency characteristic of a given age group. The best estimate of chance, then, is not mathematical chance but rather the responses of similar children who have not seen the program and are, therefore, just guessing. Accordingly, comparisons were made between those who had seen a program and those who had not. This was accomplished by making each program group a control for another. In practice, "Laverne and Shirley" and "Benson" served as controls for one another, as did "Mork and Mindy" and "Happy Days."

Procedure. The children were removed from classrooms four at a time (in a few cases three at a time if only three interviewers were available) and taken to a room equipped with a color monitor and a video player. Randomization was achieved by shuffling all available signed permission slips and then drawing the top four names from the stack. Those four children were then shown whichever program was next on the tape. Although this is not a classic randomization technique, it did serve to avoid systematic patterns of assignment to programs, and it is often the best one can do in day-to-day interviewing in public schools, in which the elegance of any procedure can be prejudiced by absenteeism, sickness, refusal to cooperate, unanticipated changes in class schedules, and so on.

Once the children were seated in the viewing room, they were told:

> "What I'm going to do is show you a program from the series "Mork and Mindy" ("Benson"...). I want you to watch the program, enjoy it, laugh if you think it's funny, and so on, but please don't bother the others who are watching it too. After it's over, we're going to ask you some questions about what you thought of the show. O.K.? Here goes."

Then the experimenter started the program and went to sit in another area of the room. The children were left alone unless somebody started fidgeting and talking excessively, in which case the offender was asked to politely pay attention and be quiet. In general, the children were reasonably quiet, although they clearly enjoyed the break from their normal routine and felt free to laugh and exclaim at appropriate times. No doubt their attention was somewhat heightened by the awareness that they were going to be interviewed and by the presence of an adult. On the other hand, the novelty of the situation, the presence of other children in the same room, and the ambience of the school outside the room provided plenty of opportunity to be distracted, so that while attention was probably somewhat better than it would have been at home the difference was probably not great.

After the program ended (since there were no commercials, about 22 or 23 minutes later), the children were escorted to another room where each was seated individually with an interviewer. Since there were four different questionnaires, each rather lengthy, it is inappropriate to include them here. The open-ended lesson question was designed so as to give children the best possible chance of understanding what information was being asked for. That is, I did not want to rely on a child's knowing what is meant by the words "lesson" or "moral." This was accomplished by first reading a simplified version of "The Tortoise and the Hare," then supplying the "moral" or "lesson" at the end. All the children knew the fable and most supplied the moral before the interviewer could. After this demonstration, the children were told: "The people who made up the program you just saw wanted to teach you something. Can you tell me what lesson you learned from the program?"

The open-ended question about the lesson preceded the multiple choice question, which was in turn followed by the items concerning comprehension of

the central events in the story. Finally, after answering the questions relevant to the program they had seen, the children guessed what the lesson might have been for one of the shows they had not seen, which served as a control response for the three-choice lesson item. This order of items seemed to minimize the extent to which responses might be formed by learning from the questionnaire itself. The interview session lasted twenty to thirty minutes, depending on the child's age and facility with the questions.

RESULTS

Comprehension of Lessons. Since the most important question here is to what extent children were able to perceive underlying lessons in the programs, we begin by looking at the results for this variable, starting with responses to the open-ended question. Although the number of ways such responses might be categorized is no doubt infinite, our analysis led to the following types, or levels:

Low-Level. Several sorts of response were grouped in this category, including "don't know," lessons or morals apparently unrelated to the story or based on clearly inaccurate perception of it, as well as responses consisting of isolated bits and pieces of information. Examples: a) "Not to go to the Kiss concert" ("Benson"--1st grade); b) "It's funny--Mork came from Ork" ("Mork and Mindy"--1st grade); c) "To read, to sit on a couch" ("Laverne and Shirley"--1st grade); d) "When Fonzie acts so great and so cool" ("Happy Days"--1st grade).

Mid-Level. Included here were lessons based on an apparently accurate perception of the story (or aspects of it) but phrased in non-general, program-specific terms, and lessons phrased in general terms but which followed from specific incidents or segments rather than from the program as a whole. Examples: a) "Katie shouldn't lie" ("Benson"--kindergarten); b) "You shouldn't use violence but always settle it by talking" ("Mork and Mindy"--4th grade); c) "Not to drink booze" ("Laverne and Shirley"--3rd grade); d) "Don't fight" ("Happy Days"--1st grade).

High-Level. General morals or lessons which seemed based on a consideration of the entire program, and which unified the complete story. Examples: "When somebody trusts you, it's important to keep that trust and not let them down" ("Benson" —6th grade); b) "Not to be rude to people that come from different places" ("Mork and Mindy"—4th grade); c) "If a person has a problem, they have to admit it, don't deny help from others" ("Laverne and Shirley"—3rd grade); d) "If someone is handicapped, it's best to treat them like a normal person" ("Happy Days"--4th grade).

Data analysis revealed the expected strong association between age group and perception of the lesson, F (2, 153) = 25.87, $p<.001$ (see also Table 1).

—INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE—

By far the majority of the kindergartners/first graders produced either low-level (44%) or mid-level (52%) responses, while only 3 of the 64 children (4%) in this age group reported high-level lessons. Sixth grade responses, on theother hand, were entirely mid-level (61%) or high-level (39%). Third/4th graders were intermediate, as one would expect (low = 10%, mid = 61%, high = 29%). Between-group analyses (Newman-Keuls) using level of response as a three-point dependent scale, showed that only the increment from K/1st to 3rd/4th was significant at $p<.05$, while the difference between 3rd/4th and 6th was not.

I turn now to the results on the closed-ended item used to assess lesson perception. There are two relevant questions regarding this variable. First, there is the question concerning the relationship between age group and "correct" response. Second, there is the question whether the groups were selecting the correct (highest-level) response at a rate better than children who had not seen the program and were guessing. A two-way analysis of variance was performed with age as one factor (with three levels) and "treatment" as the other (i.e., whether the answer was a guess or was in

response to viewing the program), and the results showed both a main effect for age, $F(2,304 = 10.42$, $p<.001$, and treatment, $F(1,304) = 4.66$, $p<.05$ (see Note 2). The interaction term was not statistically significant. In general, then, older children were more likely to select the highest-level option than younger ones, and children were more likely to select the highest-level option if they had seen a program in question than if they had not.

The results on the closed-ended question are shown in Figure 1.

—INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE—

Considering first the children's responses to the programs they had in fact viewed, it is apparent that the improvement with age in this case is continuous, that is, there is significant change not only from 36% highest-level at K/1st to 56% at 3rd/4th (difference significant at $p<.05$) but also from 3rd/4th to 6th grade (82%, $p<.05$). Further, though it is technically inappropriate to discuss "treatment effects" separately by age in the absence of a significant interaction term, it is obvious that the K/1st children did not respond to the multiple choice question any differently when they had seen a program than when they had not. In other words, they were responding at "chance" level on this variable. Finally, it is interesting to note the improvement with age in the guessing rate from 32% "correct" at K/1st to 46% at 3rd/4th to 56% at 6th grade.

Analysis of responses to both the open-ended and closed-ended items, then, indicated that no meaningful proportion of the youngest group were processing the programs at the highest level. However, the question of improvement during the second age gap was answered differently by the two analyses. Responses to the open-ended questions showed an improvement between 3rd/4th and 6th, but it was not statistically significant; responses to the

closed-ended items showed a significant improvement. In order to summarize and clarify, an index was computed which was simply the numerical sum of the "score" on the three-level open-ended coding and the binary score on the closed-ended item. One-way analysis of variance on this composite variable showed a highly significant overall age trend, $F(2,153) = 19.13$, $p < .001$, which was to be expected, but Newman-Keuls analyses showed significant ($p<.05$) differences for both the K/1st vs. 3rd/4th comparison and the 3rd/4th vs. 6th grade comparison.

Comprehension of Central Story Elements. Several questions were asked about aspects of the programs which were considered to be crucial to the construction of the underlying moral or lesson. Some of those items tapped knowledge of specific events (for instance, where Katie had gone in "Benson"), others concerned the motives behind actions (why Katie finally admitted where she had gone), still others looked at how accurately children perceived concepts which had played important parts in the programs ("bigotry" in "Mork and Mindy," "alcoholic" in "Laverne and Shirley"). Taken together, they included a fair cross-section of specific central program elements, and each had a very clear right answer. As with the multiple-choice lesson perception item, the incorrect responses were constructed so that they were somewhat plausible, either because they incorporated elements of the program or because they might for some other reason seem right to a child who hadn't really understood what was going on.

The number of these comprehension questions varied somewhat from one program to another (ranging from 6 to 10), so I created an index which simply measured the proportion of these items an individual child answered correctly. The average scores on this index, combining all programs, show a large jump from 52% at K/1st to 78% at 3rd/4th ($p<.001$), but only a slight and non-significant improvement thereafter (6th, 81% correct). Thus, the youngest

children were missing almost half of the questions considered central to the story, while the two older groups were missing only one item in five.

DISCUSSION

Let us return now to the basic, central question with which we have been concerned here. The question can be phrased something like this: In what ways, at what ages, do children decode television drama for underlying lessons or morals? For one thing, it is clear that there is only a limited awareness of such possible messages among kindergarten and first grade children. To be sure, a reasonable proportion of these youngest children--roughly 50%--derived a lesson of some sort from the program--that is, their answer was in the form of a lesson or moral and was connected in some way to the program material. But the connection was often vague and/or based on some incident or series of incidents properly viewed as part of a much broader context. Consider, for example, the answers most of the K/1st children gave for "Happy Days." Fully two-thirds of them said the lesson of the program was "Don't fight" or "You shouldn't fight." This notion was assuredly based on an altercation, primarily verbal, between Fonzie and the character named Don. No blows were ever thrown, much less landed. There were threats, though, and those threats occurred during the most physically active scene in the show, when Fonzie and Don chased each other around in wheelchairs. It is easy to see how young children might focus on this incident and ignore its context, and that is apparently what they did.

In general, the sorts of lessons these young children (and many of the older ones as well) tended to "learn" were the sort they had no doubt overlearned already at home or in school. The most common <u>mid-level</u> responses to the programs were variants of the following: "Don't drink alcohol" for

"Laverne and Shirley," "Don't fight" for "Mork and Mindy" and "Happy Days," and "Mind your parents" for "Benson." Most parents and teachers harp on these sorts of rules constantly, and no doubt they would applaud any program or story which might reinforce them, but the point here is that these sorts of lessons could easily be derived from any program which includes fighting or drinking or disobedience. In other words, they are generic, and not attached closely to the specific programs we showed in this study.

The three-year period between kindergarten and middle grade school sees an important evolution in the ability to extract underlying moral themes. Almost a third of the 3rd and 4th graders made high-level open-ended responses, and these children far outperformed the K/1st age group on the multiple-choice lesson question as well. It is interesting to note, however, that the 3rd and 4th graders did not do significantly better than their group's guessing rate. The absence of a dramatic "treatment-control" difference for this group is interesting in itself and deserves some comment.

It would be absurd, especially since almost a third of the 3rd/4th grade children responded at the highest level to the open-ended question, to conclude that this group has no real ability to abstract unifying themes from television drama. Rather, I would suggest, the ability to guess a likely lesson indexes an important aspect of comprehension. The age-related improvement in correct guessing suggests that older children are able to bring with them to the viewing situation some general notions about the kinds of lessons one is likely to find in a television program--notions which give them a ready framework for assimilating such materials. For instance, in this study, some of the older children who did not see "Benson" and just guessed the lesson may have suspected that the lesson was more likely to have been

"People can't be friends if they don't trust each other" than "Children shouldn't go to rock concerts alone." Apparently there was something about the wording or the generality of these options which served as an effective cue for many of the older guessers but not the K/1st, who guessed at a rate very close to mathematical chance.

Of course, this does not explain why the third and fourth grade viewers did not outperform their guessing rate. It seems plausible, however, that these children, when presented with three alternatives, all of which had something to do with the program, often opted for the concrete or familiar "lesson," whereas sixth graders faced with the same choice were more likely to select the most unifying and general. In any case, these findings suggest that part of the ability to decode programs for morals/lessons comes from a better set of original hypotheses.

As for the sixth graders, the results show a clear further development in the sophistication of their responses vs. the 3rd and 4th graders, as demonstrated in the comparison on the composite measure of lesson awareness. Overall, then, these data indicate a linear age-related evolution over the full age range of grade school in the ability to read television dramas for underlying morals and lessons.

On the other hand, children's awareness of the <u>central elements</u> of the stories in this study developed <u>entirely</u> within the first age gap--that is, between K/1st, when children exhibited considerable confusion as to the nuts and bolts of the programs, and 3rd/4th, when comprehension of these central elements virtually hit the ceiling. Essentially, then, children move in three years from a striking ignorance of the critical elements of the narrative to a very thorough comprehension of the essential ingredients from which any

lessons must presumably be distilled. It is clear, therefore, that more is involved in decoding for a moral lesson than a simple awareness of what went on in the program, since the lesson abstraction ability continued to improve between fourth and sixth grades, during which interval we saw no improvement in plot comprehension.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ability to see an underlying lesson probably results from a convergence of several cognitive processes. As I have suggested, older children seem to have a better sense to begin with of what a "TV lesson" is likely to be, perhaps because of more experience with viewing TV, perhaps because of a more general intuition about lessons in general—from whatever medium. Older children probably have more of a tendency spontaneously to condense, summarize, and organize information, thus making it easier to see the big picture. Supplementary data from the study support this notion in that when we asked children to retell the story of the show they had seen, sixth graders actually gave shorter responses with fewer details than third and fourth graders. It may also be that older children have developed a more useful set of schemata about the way stories are constructed in general, allowing them to pay relatively more attention to the features that relate to the extraction of a lesson or moral. Mandler and Johnson have found, for example, an improvement between early and middle grade school in the recall of both story endings and the internal reactions of characters, both of which variables are highly relevant to the process of inferring underlying messages (Mandler and Johnson 1977).

It is worth noting that the programs selected for use in this study had been purposely designed, according to the producers and the network, to convey

coherent prosocial moral themes. In a sense, this study is an assessment of such programs as well as of the cognitive skills of the child viewer. If we assume, for the moment, that the open-ended question was the more sensitive estimate of the likelihood that children will come away from such programs with a good sense of the practical or moral implications, then it is obvious that many will fail to process the programs at this level. Recall that the percentages "passing" the open-ended item were: 5% at K/1st; 29% at 3rd/4th; and 39% at 6th grade. These figures say something about the population, perhaps, but they say something about the programs as well, and about the likelihood that they can be expected to supply an "effective" avenue for teaching children moral values.

Perhaps the need for such programs to capture and hold the interest of an adult audience inevitably leads to production decisions which will act to obfuscate moral themes even as they increase entertainment value. For example, one of the programs screened but not used here was an episode of "Laverne and Shirley" built around their disagreement over what to do when they discover they don't deserve a refund check from the phone company. Laverne lobbies for keeping it, Shirley for returning it. Finally, Laverne is converted when she has a vivid dream about the life in hell she'll get for being dishonest. When they return the check in the very last scene, however, the phone company investigates their records and discovers that a mistake has indeed been made, but it is in the company's favor—Laverne and Shirley owe them money. So what is the lesson? Presumably, the producers meant to get across something like "Honesty is the best policy." In fact, what they may have conveyed is "Finders keepers, losers weepers," or "Let sleeping dogs lie." The last scene gets laughs, but it also muddies the message.

The messages of the programs were missed by many, but they were understood by a large minority. How that minority may apply such lessons behaviorally we do not know. The main body of studies on both the "prosocial" and the "antisocial" impact of television on children have concerned behaviors that can be explained on the basis of imitation of portrayed behaviors, rather than through the learning and application of a general and perhaps subtle moral lesson. Surely a different cognitive process is involved in, say, imitating attractive TV characters who perform specific cooperative behaviors (Baran, Chase and Courtwright 1979) than in watching an entire episode of "Mork and Mindy," carrying away a general notion of tolerating people who are different from you, and then applying this tolerance to the new Cambodian or Cuban child in your class. The data reported here demonstrate at a minumum that many children are able to complete at least the first part of the process—that is, they are able to formulate a reasonable sense of the lesson that is there to be learned.

NOTES

1. The actual breakdown by age and program was: K/1st--"Laverne and Shirley"=17, "Benson"=18, "Mork and Mindy"=14, "Happy Days"=15; 3rd/4th--"Laverne and Shirley"=14, "Benson"=15, "Mork and Mindy"=15, "Happy Days"=15; 6th--"Laverne and Shirley"=8, "Benson"=8, "Mork and Mindy"=8, "Happy Days"=9.

2. Since for this analysis each subject was a member of a treatment and a control group, the total df is twice the number of participants. The slight deviation from the maximum possible df reflects missing data.

TABLE 1

RESPONSES TO OPEN-ENDED LESSON QUESTION

AGE GROUP	LEVEL OF RESPONSE (%) LOW	MID	HIGH
Kindergarten/ first grade	43.8	51.6	4.7
Third/fourth	10.2	61.0	29.8
Sixth	0	60.6	39.4

NOTE: The figures represent the percentage of children within each age group who responded at a given level.

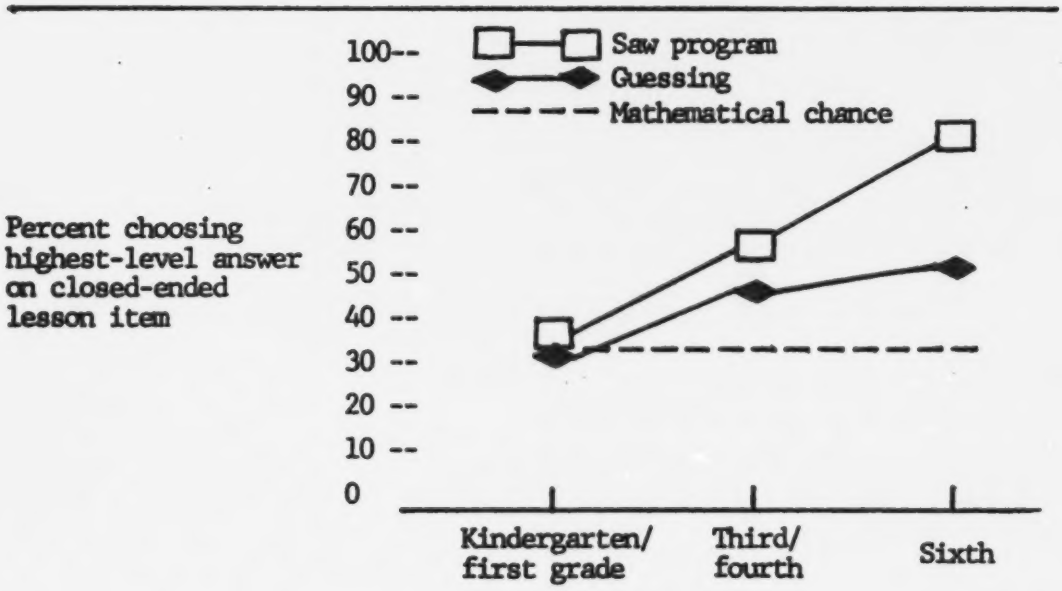

Figure 1. Frequency of highest level response on three-choice lesson item.

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